

Moving back or moving forward?

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Valorization

Background

This dissertation looks into the experience of migrants from conflict-affected countries and their development and peace-building potential upon return to the 'post-conflict' country of origin. The expectations of return migrants in debates on migration and development is contradictory: they are expected to both represent a movement *back* to the original, pre-conflict situation, and a movement *forward*, in which return migrants can contribute to positive change.

Although current policies suggest an inherent and positive link between return migration, development and peace-building, academic contributions to the discussion show that there is limited and contradictory empirical evidence on the nature, quality and direction of this link. Without theoretical and empirical foundation, the discussion on the relationship between migration, development and peace-building risks being reduced to a merely political and ideological issue that congeals into normative frames and produces inadequate policies. This thesis takes a transnational and multidimensional approach in order to overcome the dichotomies, generalizations and empirical shortcomings that surround the understanding of return migration within the migration–development–peace-building nexus.

Relevance and innovativeness

This thesis responds to a number of methodological, geographical, conceptual and empirical research gaps in research on return migration in the context of migration and development debates.

Methodological

Methodologically, this study meets the need for analytical tools that address the complexity and heterogeneity of return, by following the life course of return migrants in a mixed methods approach. Combining complementary approaches helped to come up with solid empirical data that can critically interrogate the assumptions that inform host governments' policies on return migration and development. While the comparative study highlighted some remarkable trends in return migration, the narrative as a research methodology in the in-depth case study proved to be a valuable research methodology for studying the complexity of migration.

Geographical

While research on return migration has so far mainly concentrated on African countries and the Balkans, Afghanistan as a case study is a relevant addition to the

existing literature in the study of return migration, development and peace-building, for various reasons. First, the 35-year-long history of Afghan conflict and migration shows how the globally changing political discourses of the past decades have shaped migration strategies. Second, two major trigger events of this shifting discourse, the Cold War and the events of 11 September 2001, also played a direct and crucial role in the history of Afghanistan. Third, the fact that in 2014 all eyes are again on Afghanistan makes it a relevant and timely case to focus on. Whatever the outcome of this transition period, this thesis highlights that migration will certainly continue to play a crucial role in Afghan people's survival strategies in times of conflict and crisis. This thesis argues that instead of trying to manage and contain these migration flows, a way forward in the migration and development debate should be concentrating on how to facilitate this resilience and determination of people to find a better life.

Conceptual

This thesis further developed the concept of multidimensional and multi-local embeddedness as a holistic, transnational and multidimensional approach to the multi-sited experience of migration. This concept allows us to go beyond 'reintegration', as a measure for sustainable return. Embeddedness, defined as the process of an individual's identification with and participation in one or multiple spaces of belonging, merges understandings of transnationalism and integration into one analytical framework. In addition, it highlights the interplay between agency and structure and addresses the need for an encompassing perspective, taking into account complexity, contradictions and diversity, while preventing conceptual vagueness.

In addition, I introduced an analytical framework in order to deconstruct return migration as a complex decision-making process that goes beyond dichotomies of voluntary and involuntary mobility. The framework has the potential to be used in any context of migration and non-migration, in any degree of (in)voluntariness and in changing circumstances. It may be seen as a template of factors that should be taken into account in the study of migration, with the weight and direction of the linkages varying according to the research context.

Empirical

The thesis contributes to a number of research gaps that are highly relevant for policy on migration: Chapter 3 investigated whether the use of Official Development Assistance (ODA) for Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programmes for rejected asylum seekers and undocumented migrants is justified. It analysed the determinants of post-return embeddedness, showing a number of remarkable trends across the six very different countries in the study. The findings showed the limited or even negative impact of return assistance, and the significance of the migration cycle experience and in particular the return motivation. We found that returnees faced deprivation rather than benefitting from their migration experience. It is therefore unjustified and misleading to suggest that AVR programmes may promote development.

In chapter 5 I therefore focused on the meanings of and motivations for return. The chapter highlighted the importance of post-return mobility, which I proposed to centralize in the study of return migration as an indicator of voluntary or involuntary return. Rather than formulating dichotomies, I argue that the policy and practice of migration would benefit from highlighting the complexities of migration. Analysing the complex meanings of and motivations for return can contribute to an understanding of why return assistance and policies fail and of how the needs and the potential of returnees can be better anticipated through improved policies.

In chapters 6 and 7 I interrogated the expectations of the debate on migration and development that returnees are positively selected, that they benefit from their migration experience and that they form hybrid identities so that they can negotiate change upon their return. Both chapters find that these expectations are too easily formulated and that their accuracy differs according to whether the return is voluntary or involuntary, with transnational mobility being the strongest differentiating factor. The findings therefore highlight the limitations of the applicability of return and development policies and restrict expectations of return migration and development.

In chapter 8 I projected these insights on returnees' identifications with the conflict. The chapter highlighted that policy makers' idea that migrants can and should be steered in the nature of their actions raises ethical and practical questions. With regard to the main question of this thesis on the circumstances under which return migrants are willing and able to contribute to development and peace-building, I highlighted the importance of human dynamics and transnational mobility.

Target audience

This thesis showed that while the bulk of the budgets for policies promoting migration and development go to de facto involuntary returnees, this group is unable to contribute to development in any way. The expectations on which migration and development policies are based only apply to a small minority of returnees, who are not the group that is targeted by the policies. I have shown that return migration is a complex process, to which contemporary policy is responding inadequately. This thesis shows that a thorough understanding of the heterogeneity of return migrants is essential for effective policy.

In addition to contributing to academic knowledge, this thesis therefore has a particularly urgent message to public policy makers in European and other 'industrialized' countries and civil society organizations. First, policy makers have not been responsive to arguments about the limited evidence on return and development and the need for careful wording and definitions regarding the nature of mobility. They are aware that using a vocabulary of 'voluntary return' and 'return migration and development' makes it easier to explain a politically sensitive topic to the public, and that framing the policy in this way enables them to use budgets assigned for development assistance for the return of unwanted migrants.

Second, NGOs whose primary goal is the wellbeing of migrants have now been incorporated into the migration and development discourse. NGOs who became involved in return assistance, as a way to 'do something for those who have to return',

now have to comply with the terms of the governments' return policies in order to receive funding, which basically means that they have to produce a target number of returnees. While NGOs oriented towards migrants' wellbeing have an image of independence in society and among migrants, they are in fact implementing government policy for removing unwanted migrants. The pressure to market their product in what has been called the migration industry (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen 2012) leads to claims that they contribute to sustainable return or even to development. Such claims may, in turn, be used by governments to legitimize their return policies further.

I have argued that expressing these expectations in policy papers, statistics and other communications is, however, not harmless as it affects our thinking and debating about, and communication with, migrants. Their discontent after return as a result of miscommunication and disappointment about the reality of return, may have destabilizing effects, which undermines the goals of these policies. For NGOs and policy makers, it is important to acknowledge the real impact of return programmes on individual migrants and development in the country of origin, and to re-evaluate their roles in this process.

To undo the mismatch between policy and reality, and in order to formulate adequate policies that not only address the needs and potential of returnees, but also meet the goals of policy more adequately, I propose two modifications to current policy. First, to avoid further conceptual confusion, *de facto* involuntary return should no longer be called 'voluntary' but should be redefined in terms that do justice to reality (see chapter 5). Second, the multi-tool approach, in which an attempt was made to combine multiple goals into one return migration policy, has proved inadequate. Where different policy fields have sought cooperation and common ground, the results of this thesis urge them to critically review these linkages, and to re-evaluate and disentangle the different goals that inform migration and development policies.

Outreach

Next to writing this book, I have contributed to a significant number of outreach activities that intend to disseminate the results of this thesis among academics, policy makers and practitioners. First, this thesis has so far produced seven academic articles. Two of them have been published, three will be published within the coming months and two are currently under review. Second, I have presented and discussed the results of this thesis with both academic and policy-oriented audiences at national and international conferences and meetings. Third, I have shared my methodological experiences while teaching students of Maastricht University. Fourth, I wrote an article in *Forced Migration Review*, a highly influential policy and practice oriented magazine. In the near future, I will continue to disseminate the insights from this thesis in the public, policy and academic debate.